

Correspondence between postal improvements, and the removal of the Boston post office ... April 1858.

CORRESPONDENCE RESPECTING POSTAL IMPROVEMENTS, AND THE REMOVAL OF THE BOSTON POST OFFICE.

Boston, April 3, 1858.

Dear Sir—While I congratulate you and the public upon the improvements which you have made in the administration of the affairs of the Boston Post Office, I beg to allude to the further improvements which you mentioned to me, some time since, and which had been proposed for consideration to the department at Washington.

As the removal of the Post Office is one of considerable public importance, and one in which, *in any event*, public opinion will be much divided, it has occurred to me that some public explanation of the plan proposed by you to the Post Office department at Washington should so far be made public, that the citizens of Boston may understand some of the details of the proposed improvements and conveniences.

Truly your ob't serv't, CALEB STETSON.

Nahum Capen, Esq., P. M., Boston.

Post Office, Boston, April 19, 1858.

Dear Sir—I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your favor of the 3d instant, and take pleasure in briefly replying to your inquiries. Your polite allusion to the manner in which I have performed my official duties commands my grateful acknowledgments. Be assured that so long as I have the honor to be Postmaster at Boston it will be my pride as well as my duty to see that the people are faithfully served.

At an early period, after my appointment, I received instructions from the Hon. Postmaster General to give attention to CITY POSTS, with the view "to making improvements in the letter carrier system to the full extent of the law." In New York and Philadelphia his instructions have already been fully carried out, and the people of those cities are enjoying extended postal accommodations. I have been recently authorized to adopt a similar plan in this city. Instead of boxes to be placed in stores, it is proposed to have suitable wrought iron boxes to be strongly fastened to buildings, outside, secured by locks, properly painted and lettered, and so constructed as to be perfectly safe and guarded against storms. These are regarded as preferable, in some respects, to the iron posts of

London and Paris. They are to be placed within distances not exceeding one thousand feet apart, counting the central office, and the station at South Boston. In addition to these, boxes will be placed at the principal hotels of the city for the accommodation of the travelling public. Letters will be collected four times daily from these boxes by government collectors, without charge, and all letters thus posted will be mailed with the same certainty as if they were deposited at the central office. Thus it will be seen that, by the aid of collectors and letter carriers, the post office will be brought almost to every man's door. Other improvements are contemplated, but as yet they are not matured.

It will be remembered that soon after I assumed my official duties, as postmaster, I issued a circular asking suggestions from the public, such as would enable me to know, not only the wants of the people, but to make improvements should any be needed. In reply to this circular, I received numerous communications, both verbal and written, and upon a variety of topics quite interesting, and to me instructive. They were written by persons of both sexes,—and the public is already enjoying advantages the results of suggestions thus communicated. The subject most prominent, however, was the removal of the Post Office. I was frequently and earnestly entreated by many to give it my earliest attention. With a long and familiar acquaintance with its exterior accommodations, it was not difficult to realize the existence of a necessity so often pointed out, and yet so patiently permitted to be continued. But, as this necessity is now professedly conceded by all parties,—it ceases to be a duty to point out the dangers, difficulties and annoyances of the present locality. They have been too long witnessed and realized by the people of Boston to need any recapitulation on my part. I found, too, that the good of the service demanded different and more extended accommodations.

Having ascertained that it was not the purpose of the government, at present, to erect a new post office, I felt it to be my imperative duty to turn my attention to the practicability of erecting a new building, by private enterprise, that would be safe as an investment and at the same time economical for the government to occupy. The subject of locality, although not a new one,—presented the greatest difficulty which I had to encounter. I could not forget the discussions of the past, when the office was removed only a few D 2 yards from Water street to the Old State House, and from the Old State House to the Boston Exchange. With the associations of postal convenience impressed upon my mind, as connected with the neighborhood of State street,—for more than a quarter of a century,—I could not, at once, divest myself of a natural preference that the office should still remain within the circle so long identified with the business of State and Congress streets. It was my first wish to find a site as near as possible to the present,—that I might be relieved from the labors of discussion and explanation. I examined first of all—the Old State House, —but found it altogether too narrow. Besides,—it affords no proper place for mail wagons,

—and it is surrounded by streets—on all sides—rendering approaches both difficult and dangerous. With the aid of others, mostly ignorant of my purpose, I explored State, Kilby, Water, Milk, Franklin, Summer, Winter, Bromfield, School, Court, Tremont and Washington streets. Some sites were found—but which could neither be hired nor purchased, and others that were either involved in the meshes of the law, or so situated that they could not be made safely available within the reach of private enterprise. In these explorations, which were professedly made for mercantile purposes, my attention was asked to the estates on the corner of Summer and Chauncy streets. This site, though not so large as government would have occasion to purchase for the future, was found to be sufficient for a few years—by occupying two or more stories. In deciding upon the capacity of the lot,—I relied upon a judgment superior to my own,—upon the judgment of practical men who have spent a large portion of their lives in the labors of the Post Office.

At first, I made objections to the distance from State street, thinking that many might oppose the change, who otherwise would favor a nearer site. When, however, the facts connected with the "*Pratt estate*," on Summer street, were stated to me,—I felt that I had reached a path which government had sanctioned, and where I could walk with safety. The people of Boston were publicly invited by government in 1854—during a period of several weeks by three daily papers of the city,—to propose sites for consideration suitable for a Post office and Court house. Seven, only, were proposed, viz: the Court house, the Massachusetts Block, an estate on Bowdoin square, an estate on Charles street, the Bromfield House, an estate on Battery March street, Milk street and Liberty square, and the Pratt estate. These sites were visited by the Postmaster General, the Secretary of the Interior, U. S. Marshal Freeman and by the Postmaster at Boston. Their judgment was instant and emphatic, and in favor of the Pratt estate, and, so far as I have been able to learn, their decision was generally approved.^{*} I found, too, that at a later period the site on the corner of Bromfield and Tremont streets, had been selected and submitted to government for consideration, *without public notice*, and favored by some of our most respectable and influential citizens,[†] as a most desirable locality, and some of whom, let it be observed, are now counted among the most active remonstrants against the site on Summer street! The distance from State to Tremont street is about the same as that from State to Summer street, and it is *away* from the central line of business. The site was selected, approved, and the papers were sanctioned by the President of the United States and by others of the government, but for reasons not as yet made public the conveyance was not made, and the project was abandoned.

* *U. S. Marshal's Office, Boston, April 17, 1858.*

Dear Sir—Yours of 6th inst. is received, and, in reply, say, that the Hon. R. McClelland, secretary of the interior, and Hon. James Campbell, Postmaster General, visited Boston in 1855, and with the

postmaster of this city and myself, viewed the different localities offered for a court house and post office, and were decidedly of opinion that the location in Summer street, called the Pratt estate, was the best proposed. There was no division or discussion on this subject, the opinion was unanimous. Respectfully, your obt. svt., WATSON FREEMAN.

Nahum Capen, Esq., Postmaster, Boston.

† Edward Everett, Rufus Choate, R. C. Winthrop, and others of similar standing.

When I found upon record two acts of government favoring the removal of the Post Office from its present neighborhood, I did not hesitate to take the further step of considering what was demanded for the future good of Boston—as connected with this subject. I was led to review the past and to mark the probable future. It may be proper to remark in this connection that I had no personal interest to subserve in making one selection more than another. No land owner, or speculator, had any knowledge of my purpose until after the site was selected and the government had acted. The negotiation was made with the Hon. Geo. H. Kuhn, as trustee and agent. It was conducted with his characteristic prudence, candor and uprightness. But to return. I found that the growth of Boston, *southward*, was A PHYSICAL NECESSITY. This necessity is not to be regarded as one of regret, but of congratulation to the citizens of Boston. The future prosperity of State street demands this growth. The growing interests of navigation, the great and various industrial interests of New England,—had united to increase the business of the Metropolis to such an extent,—as to demand a larger territory for its ordinary activity. This has been frequently illustrated by the acts of the people—in various ways. Facts are more instructive than assertions. The city authorities have afforded examples of their judgement—by locating the Public Library on Boylston street, and by voting new avenues from State to Summer streets. The young men of Boston have spoken in favor of Summer street—by erecting their Hall and Library building upon the Pratt estate,—and their hall has been considered as sufficiently central for occasional meetings of the Board of Trade. The mechanics of Boston—have gone still further south, to Bedford street—for a site upon which their splendid building is to be placed. The government of the United States have again acted by purchasing the Masonic Temple for a Court House, and our largest merchants are demonstrating the reality of this growth southward by erecting their spacious and elegant warehouses on Franklin street. Nearly all the wholesale dry goods merchants, and three-fourths of the extensive boot and shoe dealers are south of State street. Summer street may be regarded as the present centre of the retail business of Boston,—and it is an interesting fact that more than half of all the sugar and molasses shipped to Boston is landed south of Summer street. Most of our citizens who do business in State street travel south to their dwellings, or to the inviting vicinity, which is marked soon to be made a part of our city. It is well known that State street is mostly used by the banks, insurance companies, brokers,

and merchants on 'Change—for the brief period of five or six hours—of the twenty-four,—and then deserted for more pleasing localities. The northern wharves are beginning to be regarded only as places of storage,—and the time is not far distant when the practice, peculiar to large cities, will be adopted in Boston,—that of selling merchandize by brokers—or at the counting rooms of merchants—by samples—and not at their stores. That the growth of Boston cannot be checked, is too obvious to need demonstration,—and all, I doubt not, will agree with me in the self-evident proposition, that, *if it grows*, it must have room to be larger. Of the present voters of Boston, as registered in the different wards—a decided majority is as near or nearer Summer street than State street,—and this majority is fast increasing.

It has been asked why the merchants and the people were not particularly consulted, and why the Postmaster did not advise his personal friends with respect to the subject of a proper locality. A little reflection cannot fail to satisfy any candid mind, not swayed by interest, that such a course could not be pursued without inevitable embarrassment and failure. The merchant is liable to be counselled by his personal convenience; the real estate owner by his interest, the mechanic and laborer by their employers, and the friend by personal considerations—often incompatible with public duty. It might prove to be a battle of parties moved by self interest against others of similar motives and at the expense of personal friends. It was no party question, no question belonging to any particular class or interest, but one concerning all classes, the people, the men and women of Boston. The poor as well as the rich, the laborer and the mechanic as well as the merchant and the professional man.

Having all the information which could be gathered from authentic sources bearing upon the subject, and having long been familiar with the condition, growth, and wants of the city, I saw no course to be pursued but to consult my Official Superiors at Washington. They were under high obligations of office to do justice, and were swayed by no prejudice or interest. They had upon the files of the Department the accumulated testimony of years, relating to this very subject, and had ample means within reach to judge quite as accurately of the postal wants of Boston as any resident citizen. Indeed, with their great experience in matters of this kind, and with their mode of systematizing, upon a scale of disinterested fairness, their decision would be much more likely to be true to the people than if made by a compromise of opposing interests, where power too often prevails against principle. The subject was fully and fairly submitted to the Department, and it was promptly considered and carefully decided. It is my present belief that should government appoint a disinterested commission to select a site for purchase, it would be made even *south* of Summer street. Not wishing to rely too much on my own judgment, I respectfully invited the Honorable Postmaster General, or his first assistant, to visit Boston, that he might judge of the propriety of the proposed removal.

Before closing I beg to say a word or two concerning the *mission* of the post office, a subject but little considered and but little understood.

It has been truly said by a distinguished thinker, that "the ends and aims of the Post Office are higher than to give facility for the transaction of business. It is a great engine of civilization and of social improvement, and every man and woman has equal right to its advantage." The business classes, only, derive from its cheap facilities a pecuniary profit.

What conversation is to a neighborhood the Post Office is to the world,—it is the moving atmosphere of social life and thought. It is a Democratic Institution that advances, elevates and enlarges the area of freedom and happiness everywhere. It is the servant of agriculture, commerce and manufactures; it is the servant of science, morals, religion, education, benevolence, charity, love. In a word, it is the untiring servant of humanity—entering alike the hovels of the poor, the cells of the prisoner, the secluded dormitories of the pauper, the shops of the mechanic, the dwellings of the farmer, the retreats of woman, the counting rooms of the merchant, the palace of the king. No class can claim to control it, and the humblest of the living has equal right to speak his wishes concerning its government. Half of the whole population are women, and no site for a Post Office, either in the city or country, should be favored without a respectful regard to their comfort and convenience. A very large proportion of the women who have occasion to visit the Boston Post Office, are worthy and respectable persons. Some of them belong to the best families of Boston, and if there are exceptions to be made, it must be considered that these exceptions would be more than balanced by a corresponding class of men, who often claim position on account of wealth, but who cannot sustain their claim on account of character.

It is not so much the number of letters to be delivered, as the number of persons who are to receive them, to be considered. The number of persons who have occasion to seek postal accommodations in Boston is very large. These are to be consulted, considered and accommodated.

I remain, with considerations of respect and regard, your servant and friend, NAHUM CAPEN.

Hon. Caleb Stetson, Boston, Mass.

Press of Boston Post.